

THIS IS JUST TO SAY

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

—*William Carlos Williams*

Borrowed Poems

Borrowed poetry is a type of poem that is created by “borrowing” lines or phrases from other sources, in particular poems. Borrowed poetry pays tribute and brings new life and added depth to the words of others. Students absolutely love writing these forms of poems, because, on the surface, it appears as though they don’t have to do any real thinking. *Au contraire!*

While you can borrow words from newspaper articles, novel passages, signs, etc., for the purpose of this lesson, try using poetry. We’ve spent a great deal of time talking about listening and reading and watching great poetry, so let’s build on that. And, what better poem to begin with than with a poem by Pulitzer Prize-winning poet William Carlos Williams.

Williams was a student at Horace Mann High School when he decided to become both a doctor and a writer. He established his medical practice in 1910, and he wrote poems and practiced medicine in Rutherford

for the next 40 years. Inspired by the world of his patients, he wrote on prescription pads and between patient visits. He explored new forms of poetry that were completely unique by experimenting with meter (the basic rhythmic structure in a line of poetry) and enjambment (the continuation of a single thought from one line to another). Williams wanted his poems to mimic the kind of American language that he heard in everyday conversations.

One of my favorite poems, and one of Williams’s most famous poems, which students and teachers love to mimic, is “This Is Just To Say.” I love this poem because of its simplicity, but also because of its ... sensuality. That’s right, in my estimation, this marvelous imagist poem is about as sexy as Stan Getz’s sax on “Desifinado” or Etta James’s bluesy contralto on “Till There Was You.” But, for the purposes of your students and this lesson, let’s just focus on the missing plums.



KwameTime
Video for Students
Introducing
Borrowed Poems

(See page 19.)



Lesson in Action

Borrowed Poems

When I teach poetry to elementary and middle school students, I almost always begin by reading and discussing “This Is Just To Say.” Sometimes, students are unimpressed, and the boldest ones express reservations about whether this poem follows the right “ingredients.” After discussing why it may or may not be poetry, I offer them this simple insight. Poetry is different from other types of writing because of the way it is written. More importantly, good poetry changes the way the reader sees the world. It can be so powerful that the reader is permanently changed after reading the poem.

“This Is Just to Say” encourages students to explore their connection with the world (Koch 1990; Sidman 2007). After reading the poem together, ask students what features of the poem stand out. At first, students may need some prompting to understand that the poem is a note left on the refrigerator. Use the following questions to guide a discussion about the poem:

- Who is the speaker?
- What is the setting?
- Who do you think the author is apologizing to?
- How would you describe the tone of this poem?
- Do you think the author is really sorry? Why?

The next step is to encourage students to make connections with the poem by sharing personal experiences:

- What kinds of things have you been sorry for?
- Tell about a time you have apologized without meaning it.

THIS IS JUST TO SAY

I have eaten
the cookies
that were in the jar.

And which you were
probably saving
for dessert.

Forgive me
they were
so scrumptious,
so colorful
and sugary.

—*Marisol, Grade 3*



Lesson in Action *(cont.)*

Almost every one of your students will identify a time they did something that was wrong but was really fun. Because the poem is written in a personal voice, students are eager to share their stories. This is a good time to allow them to recite their experiences to partners—working out the details and emotions. Ask the students to think of times they did things they weren't supposed to, but that were really a lot of fun. Remind them to picture the scenes and to describe the settings, the feelings they experienced, and who they would apologize to.

THIS IS JUST TO SAY

I have intercepted
your pass
at Super Bowl XLI

which you probably
expected
to go for a touchdown

forgive me
it was a bad throw
and the wind was against you
and I took it to the house

it was so fulfilling
and I felt on top of the world
doing my dance in the end zone

—Addison, *Grade 6*

Using “This Is Just To Say” as a model, have students quick-write for 10 to 20 minutes about their experiences. They can then select interesting phrases and words from their quick-writes to write their own apology poems. There is always great enthusiasm for this lesson because it allows students to explore exaggeration, humor, and silly situations (Ontario Ministry of Education 2009). This experience helps writers develop an awareness of voice—some whimsical, some more serious, all valuable—and word choice, while inferring the feelings of the reader.

The results of this exercise vary from student to student. Some make insightful observations and connections between images and ideas immediately, while others need additional prompting. Before moving on, however, have students share their poetry in small groups and with the class. Sharing creates a sense of pride in and enthusiasm for their poetry, and it gives

them the confidence to move on to other poems (Kovalcik and Certo 2007). Even the students who struggle with the exercise acquire understanding and insight from talking about and sharing poetry.